

**BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY
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„Reading buildings” in the mirror of textual architecture

Hermeneutical Interpretation of the Kaisa House Library (Helsinki)

PHD THESIS

SUMMARY

**Doctoral supervisor:
Prof. univ. dr. Veress Carol**

**PhD candidate:
Incze Éva**

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Abstract

In his popular study, *'Building and Image Reading'*, Gadamer highlights that architectural creations are subject to reading in the same way as texts are. Later on, the famous Swiss architect, Jacques Herzog, makes an interview with the elderly philosopher. Being asked about the meaning of architecture, Gadamer's answer is not a merely theoretical one; he speaks about their family house in Breslau, where he spent his childhood. The aim of the present treatise is to accomplish the hermeneutical task that originates in the metaphorical expression "building reading", discussing how reading might be defined in relation with architectural creations. It reflects Gadamer's *philosophical hermeneutics*, the target of which is the comprehension of *building reading* based on a mainly *interpretative* and less problematising or critical investigation. The main attempt is to outline a possible horizon for the relation between the *dialogical* and *linguistic comprehension* of buildings and their *textual interpretation* in the case of non-textual works of art.

In his study "*Building and Image Reading*", Gadamer raises the problem of accomplishing the analogy between literary and graphic works in the same way as Plato, in whose work "the sparks of apprehension" are called into being by the friction between the two structures: that of the state and the one of the human spirit. As Gadamer considers, the basic principle of interpretation is the analogy, whose hermeneutical version is highlighted with the help of the concept of friction. In the light of this statement, contrary to the classical logical scheme, an analogy does not mean any conclusion stemming from similarities, but such an explanatory process, which, with the help of the interconnection of differences, allows producing the appropriate perspective. Considering the task set by Gadamer, my treatise aims at achieving the

analogy between architectural and literary works, having its starting point in the tradition of the aesthetics of objects, which deals with the unbridgeable gap between the two branches of art. The following step of the analogy is converging the *experience of building* and that of the *text* based on the hermeneutical concept of *reading*, resulting in the interaction of the two media within the artistic experience. The hermeneutic circle of analogy is closed through the unification of the theoretical horizon of building reading and experience, which can be carried out through the interpretation of a given architectural work.

In conformity with the *mirror hypothesis*, the comprehension of building reading, the outlining of the comprehensive system from a hermeneutical point of view can be completed with the help of the experience of building. Therefore, the aim is the accomplishment of such an *interpretation of building* that reflects the hermeneutical concept of reading in the architectural work, which is constructed like a text; in other words, questioning a building about the meaning of reading.

During my short journey to Helsinki I encountered the work of a young Finnish couple, both architects, namely the building of the university library named the *Kaisa House*. My first visit in the building made great impression on me, and later on led to revelations of utmost importance. On one hand, it became obvious that the building of the library can provide the clearest answer to the question of *building reading*: on the other hand, I realised that *Kaisa House* represented the balancing strength of the hermeneutical interpretation to be achieved in the thesis. The library is the venue of reading, in other words the venue of the artistic experience, thus making it speak involves the reflection of reading as well. The interpretation of the library building becomes a mirror that enables covering a hermeneutical circle, within which the comprehension originating in the experience of building facilitates the unfolding of the reading themes, and, in the meantime, it allows architectural works to come off according to the hermeneutical conception of reading.

There are two sections in the reasoning of the treatise: the first section deals with the theoretical background of the concepts of building and reading, comprising the first and second chapters of my work, whereas the second section is based on the presentation of the experience of building reading, outlined in the third and fourth chapters.

1. Aesthetic ranking of architecture

Regarding architecture, Vitruvius formulated three requirements: *firmitas*, *utilitas* and *venustas*. However, as Roger Scruton pointed out, this has always been a problem for the aesthetic thinking, as, contrary to other branches of art, architecture is determined by materiality and functionality to a great extent. Chapter One is based on the paradigmatic ranking of architecture and poetry, the emphasis being laid on the conditions made by the criterion of divisions within the different artistic and philosophical approaches, considering the trinity formulated by Vitruvius. One of the most determining connections between architecture and poetry is related to the concept of '*techné*', which is the key concept of the ancient pre-aesthetic comprehension of art. According to W. Tatarkiewicz's research, the competence lying within the *techné* operates as a leading principle; on this basis, every artist is an *architékton*, in other words, the leader of creation, who disposes of some knowledge of the highest rank, with which he can direct the art of creation. In the ancient systems of classification, both architecture and poetry belonged to the unity of *techné*, within which they could be distinguished as separate branches of art. While investigating Plato's and Aristotle's divisions discussed in teleological interpretation, it becomes obvious that, whereas architecture is a branch of art which creates and, in a questionable way, also imitates original and useful objects, the branches forming the system of modern arts – poetry, painting, sculpture and music – were considered forms of *imitation*, and were classified as forms of *mimetic* art. As a consequence, a certain model of comparing these four forms to each other emerges, which considers the four mimetic branches of art of the same rank, and clearly excludes architecture and rhetoric from this circle. The other important element of the ancient philosophy of art is the theory of mimetics, whose later expansion questioned the aesthetic rank of architecture during the long history of aesthetic debates, whether art had a poetic or mimetic character.

In modern theories, the different branches of art are systematised from an aesthetic point of view. Based on Paul Oskar Kristeller's research, in these theories the following tendencies may be identified: *poetry* has a central position, the aesthetic rank of architecture is questioned, and rhetoric disappears from ranking. The argumentative background of this phenomenon is provided by the considerations of two influential thinkers: Hegel and Étienne-Louis Boullée (one

of the most significant representatives of the literature of theory of architecture in the 18th century). In their conception, the only condition from among the three ones formulated by Vitruvius is that of the shape, which is required by an artistic approach based on such an aesthetic viewpoint that admits the hierarchy of poetry. Therefore, it treats the architectural object according to its aesthetic aspect only, ignoring its unity. The divisions outlined within the modern paradigm with a view to the accuracy of the aesthetic status place architecture and *rhetoric* on a common ground, and in this way, they pave the way for the analysis of the correlation between the two artistic branches.

In the tradition of ancient rhetoric, in Cicero`s descriptions referring to public speaking or those of Vitruvius connected to the preparation of the process of construction, one can identify similarities between linguistic and architectural forms. It can be demonstrated that in both cases materiality and functionality appear as artistic factors. On receptive level, the logical analogy of public speaking and building may raise the question of a close relationship between the art of speech comprehension, in other words the hermeneutics, and the experience and use of building.

There were numerous opportunities for architecture and poetry to meet in the diversified aesthetic, philosophical and artistic theories of the 20th century. N. Hartmann`s and Lukács György`s aesthetics is a good example for the persistence of the classical aesthetic tradition, in which the principles of art can hardly be applied to architecture. In redefining architecture from the perspective of the philosophy of arts in the 20th century, Neil Leach`s collection of texts entitled *Rethinking Architecture*, published in 1997, identifies five types of approaches: the modern perspective of architecture, the phenomenological-hermeneutical, the structuralist, the postmodern and poststructuralist directions. All of them are able to highlight the dissolution of systemising and classifying attempts, as well as the different shades of the correlation between architecture and poetry.

Another analysis is carried out upon M. Heidegger`s presentations comprised in its study entitled *The Origin of the Work of Art*, demonstrating a certain approach to Gadamer`s viewpoint. One of its outstanding parts is the illustration of the *ontology* of the artwork through the example of the Greek temple, but he does not perform an in-depth analysis of the other forms of art. In outlining Heidegger`s perspective, I mainly rely on Rafael Capurro`s, Lars-Olof Åhlberg`s, John Bruin`s and Loboczky János`s interpretations, and my attempt is to point out the fact that, reopening the existential dimension of art, the interoperability between architecture and

poetry might occur again, and that architecture has a key role in highlighting the origin of creation. In Heidegger's later studies, the concepts of building and expending are embedded in that of dwelling; building and expending operate as a double centre in the existential force field of the artwork originating in dwelling.

Gadamer mentions architecture as 'the best and greatest form of art', which comes forth within the hermeneutical perception of art. On one hand, the top status of architecture is due to its self-transcending tendency, according to which all buildings are subject to an intended purpose; on the other hand, they have to be integrated into a certain natural and architectural environment. In hermeneutical perspective, it is architecture that sets the best example for how art has to be integrated into interconnections between life and targets, and how transmission has to be carried out, eliminating the abstract character of art. According to Gadamer, the peculiar importance of architecture is also highlighted by the fact that it has a comprehensive position in relation with the other branches of art, as it is architecture that creates the space for all artistic presentations (poetry, music, dance, etc). In the meantime, as a universal background atmosphere, architecture plays an outstanding role in every artistic experience. A third positioning of architecture aims at placing different branches of art and architecture in a comprehensive system of correlation based on the arts' need of verosimilarity, as it was pointed out in his study entitled *Word and Picture*. Gadamer's hermeneutical perspective, that an artwork can be understood as *a piece of reality*, can be applied to architectural works as well, all this conferring an outstanding status to this branch of art.

In Gadamer's perspective, play, symbols and celebration form the anthropological basis of art. Investigations are limited to architectural creations, more precisely the outlining of the hermeneutical perspective based on the three key concepts is traced back to the architecture's mode of existence. The concept of *play* is applied according to life experience, whereas the essence of architectural mimetics is comprehended viewing Vitruvius' anthropomorphism and August Schmarsow's perception of space; then, identifying the time structure of *celebration* with rhythm and monumentality, we create the concept of the hermeneutics of the building. The hermeneutical concept of architectural artwork does not refer to objects that could be assessed as artistic creations based on some sort of aesthetical canon, but rather on such experiences that show mimetic correlations, with their specific duality being unified in their temporality, in which a building and its receiver are implied in the play of art. The unity of the experience of building

is the result of a mimetic relationship, and concludes in a peculiar time formation. When contemplating buildings not in space, but in time, they present themselves as such processional formations that recall their original function and previous life correlations; in the meantime, they become present and take up the pace of concrete lifestyle due to transmission of different previous alternating functions. In hermeneutical perspective, the analogy between architecture and literature, building and text come into close proximity as analogy of the *experience of building and that of the text*.

2. The hermeneutical concept of reading

Chapter Two deals with the hermeneutical problem of the phenomenon of *reading*, which came forth in Gadamer`s studies published in the 70s and 80s. Not only the concept of loud reading did appear in those years, but that of music reading, image reading or building reading as well. In the following section of my treatise, I investigate the hermeneutical concept of reading, revealing the paradigmatic difference between *reading by spelling* related to the cognitive perspective, and *reading by decoding*, whose principles have been worked out within the semiotic approach, as well as the linking opportunities to comprehensive reading.

According to the definition given by the theory of reading, reading by spelling is a special cognitive process, linked to alphabetically recorded texts, a certain form of linguistic competence, and it means the text-specific demarcation of the concept of reading. This arises numerous problems; for example, the concept of reading related to written texts cannot be directly applied to non-textual creations, thus to architectural works either; only indirect remarks can be made regarding the reading of buildings. Opposing the visual perception of letters, while perceiving an architectural object, all senses operate in the same time, thus the perception of building and linear perception might only show a structural analogy.

In the spirit of the semiotic approach, reading is not limited either to the spelling of written words and sentences, or to that of printed texts; in a much broader sense, it comprises decoding of the content lying beyond the surface of different simbologies. The structuralist perspective, which defines architecture as a *semiotic system*, is presented by Umberto Eco`s perspective, which considers architectural signs semiotic structures identical to linguistic ones. The architectural sign can be identified as the mark-carrier of the architectural object, whose secondary meaning is the concrete functions it can bear, while its meaning can be interpreted

with the help of conventional codes. From the receiver`s perspective, building reading means the decoding of architectural language. The iconological interpretation grounded by Panovsky aims at the structuralist revelation of the poetical code of visual language, and it is based on the identification and thorough analysis of readable architectural phenomena (symbols, metaphors, architectural narrative, etc), which operate like texts. Panofsky`s *iconological method* emphasises the meaning of the work of art and its artistic content instead of the mere work, and in order to achieve this, he combines the interpretation of the concrete work of visual art with the circle of knowledge that refers to the style defined by the principles of the history of arts. In order to understand such works, besides the empirical cognition one should study written tradition, which has preserved the codes serving the purpose of decoding their meaning, thus we can reach the comprehension of work through the iconographical diagnosis and explanation. Recognising the positive significance of the tradition of interpretation work represents an important linking point for the experience of building seen from a hermeneutical perspective.

In several of his studies, Gadamer defines reading as translation: repositioning of ‘frozen signs’ in the medium of thoughts, transfer from one side to the other, from writing to language, or translation that ‘trespassing the petrified trace of words is heading for the meaning of the sentences’. Analysing the two sides of the translation, it becomes clear that writing and text are substantially different, and they form a divided terrain, the recorded writing becomes independent from the concrete speech situation, and it appears as a dead substance similar to the architectural object, which is led by reading towards living language. One of the moral teachings of loud reading is that reading transforms writing, present as non-linguistic phenomenon, into a linguistic creation, namely into a text. Gadamer mentions the personal experience of subvocalisation and several examples of loud reading, through which it becomes obvious that the centre of gravity of text-reading is the sound circulating in the inner ear. Analysing the mediatic role of this inner sound which appears in reading, it can be ascertained that meaning reference and sound structure form a single unit, thus, understanding the essence of a written text is materialised in the sound movement heard in the inner ear. Interpretation occurs as a differential interaction between sound and cognition, the two of them having an interconditioning impact one upon the other. The meaning of the text is built as the creation of sound; even so, the text does not ‘dissolve’ during the interpretative attempts and fine tuning as the sound persisting in the whole reading holds the unit together, the text emerges due to a play of harmony.

Gadamer has an extensive comprehension of reading on a large scale, which might be a general scheme for every artistic experience; reading as form of experience, and experience as a certain form of reading, they both belong to the work. Applying the scheme of reading, one might wonder how the 'inner voice' comes forth in the experience of building, which transforms the visual, kinesthetic and multisensorial perception, comprising the whole body, into a coherent cognitive movement, thus creating the conditions for the status of linguistic text.

Related to this matter, we have investigated three interpretative experiments: on one hand, the deconstructivist experiment, resulting from Derrida and Peter Eisenman's cooperation, which regards architectural creation a formation derivable from language; the building is a folding with no external meaning, which might be traceable back to language. On the other hand, considering Oskar Bätschmann's *hermeneutical alternatives specified on objects* and Gottfried Boehm's *image hermeneutics*, we encounter two important points: that cognition might unfold in some other media, different from the language medium, with a different way of organisation, for example in the medium of visibility (Boehm), and that linguistic interpretation might be approached appropriately if unconventional linguistic and conceptual attributions are applied, thus it unfolds as a metaphorical process; in other words, it gives birth to new cognition and definition of visual representation (Bätschmann).

The application of hermeneutic approach to architecture can be traced in Lindsay Jones's *sacred architectural hermeneutics*, whose generalisations have been taken into account in the present treatise. According to Jones, buildings do not have a self-reliant existence. The quality of buildings, for example their sacredness, does not reside in the formation of architectural tools, but in the interaction between architectural forms and religious ceremonies. The perspective is directed towards the use of buildings and the ongoing events, through the 'ritual-architectural' one that takes place inside of them. In launching the dialogue between the building and its viewer, an indispensable role is attributed to 'architectural allurements'.

These approaches contribute to the perspective of building reading with determining aspects, which raise the opportunities of linguistic interpretation and non-linguistic cognition. However, they do not provide the necessary frame for understanding the concrete conditions of the experience. The issue of corporeality belonging to the experience of architectural works is discussed in Richard Schusterman's *somathic aesthetics*. Contrary to the conception of the 'body as background', the somathic aesthetics admits that the body is a key dimension of experiential

learning, which is defined as ‘the place of perceptive-aesthetic pleasure (aesthesis) and the creative self-formation’. Therefore, understanding resides in corporeal experience, its recognition is important for aesthetics, because the phenomena that emerge during the process of experiencing artworks are not always linguistic, conceptual influences, and they are still understood by receivers. Architecture might be grasped through ‘intelligent corporeality’, through such phenomena as atmosphere.

The concept of *atmosphere* that occurs with Gadamer as well emerges in contemporary reception aesthetics. Gernot Böhme draws the attention to the fact that the phenomenon of atmosphere, which is difficult to define and express, is present not only in artistic media, but also in everyday life. Böhme’s aspiration is directed towards grounding the concept of atmosphere as the unity of environmental circumstances and subjective mood, as a concept for mutual intercession. Atmosphere is not a mere thing, but a comprehensive, all-embellishing emotional medium, which is created in the concreteness of the experiential situation. Investigating the architectural component of atmosphere based on Peter Zumthor and Szentkirályi Zoltán’s considerations, it is obvious that architectural creations possess some ‘special effects’ whose content are triggered by the person’s *emotional sensibility*.

The hermeneutical opportunities of perceiving the atmosphere are outlined mainly on the grounds of their characteristics identified by Böhme, Shusterman, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Juhani Pallasmaa and Szentkirályi. In Böhme’s view, perception of the atmosphere shows a certain duality: on one hand, it presents the environment, which emanates a certain type of atmosphere, on the other hand, our presence, because as a participant, one can benefit from the atmosphere, and can recognise themselves in it, as being someone, who is in that place at that moment. Shusterman highlights the corporeality of perceiving atmosphere; in harmony with it, Gumbrecht states that texts create an atmosphere which influences the whole body, and the voice of texts is dissolved in the texts produced by them. According to Pallasmaa, perceiving the atmosphere might be achieved with the help of peripheral vision, which is an uncontrolled mass of perceptions that comprises and condenses the experiential situation unintendedly, and which has the value of understanding. Szentkirályi describes the associative character of atmosphere, which motivates an intellectually defined meaning, thus introducing the building into an artistic dimension.

Revealing the different aspects of atmosphere, it can be understood as an ambience which is created during physical contact, and which spreads out, involving the building and its receiver. This is the turning point, where buildings are transformed into creations, and receivers are introduced into the architectural work. It is the atmosphere of the building, where architectural work and its receiver merge. Furthermore, the atmosphere of building is not a mere sentimental accompaniment of the reception of buildings and other artistic creations; on the contrary, it has a hermeneutical importance through the fact that there is always something significant revealed by the atmosphere. Based on the model of loud reading, reading of texts can be applied to understanding architectural works by involving the entire somatic dimension, the cognitive movement being arranged in the correlation of atmospheric processes. In conformity with this statement, I intend to replace the concept of loud reading with that of organic reading, in which reading can be viewed in the organic unity of inner cognitive processes and corporeality.

3. The 'library case'

Chapter Three deals with the phenomenon named '*the library case*' in academic literature, which is a discourse about the facilities offered by libraries and books due to the expanded use of electronic devices. However, the present chapter comprises a wider approach in order to emphasise the hermeneutical opportunities of functions of buildings. The medial meaning of library is highlighted by M. Foucault's concept of *heterotopy*. Libraries are also heterotopies, which are not only mere venues of collecting, keeping and reading books, but they are also attempts to accumulate endless knowledge and time; in other words, they are the venues of a certain kind of utopia. Therefore, the act of reading the building of library opens a *hermeneutical space*, where the purpose of discourse and the idea of building reading might be approached from many different perspectives. Firstly, it shows the opportunity of building reading through the experience of a certain building; secondly, it leads to the comprehension of the concept of reading within concrete building reading. Chapter Three comprises the review of the paradigm of library functions and some examples of architecture; then the institutional background of Finnish architecture of libraries, the architectural traditions grounded by Alvar Aalto, as well as the architectural conception of libraries founded in the 2000s are outlined.

4. Kaisa House Library (Helsinki)

Chapter Four, which is the last chapter of my treatise, represents my attempt to accomplish the *hermeneutical reading* of the building of Kaisa House Library in Helsinki.

In my interpretation, the natural experience of building is reconstructed in the following way: the description of contemplation at first sight, considering those parts of the building and phases of perception, which have contributed to the unfolding of the peculiar atmosphere of the building, transmitting the feeling of grace and elegance. In this description I seek to identify the architectural atmospheric elements on one hand, on the other hand I lay the stress on those qualities of atmosphere, which emerge at first impression. On interpretative level, emphasis is laid on the theoretical explanation of fragments identified during the process of atmosphere; therefore, examining the decoration of the façade, the perception of inner space, the colour and material effects, as well as the functional characteristics of the building, I focus on the outlined concept of building.

The façade decoration of the Kaisa House is formed by a geometrical motif, which pervades and expands to and all parts of the building, dissolving its corporeality, and becomes a transmitter of meaning that puts an expressive conventional sign into perspective, as it can be clearly recognised and described whether it is about a curve flow or an irregular graph.

The space opening to the sky through the roof window, arranged in the view of *ellipses*, reproduces the endless natural space and localises the reader, the space unfolding in the time horizon evokes the allegory of the historicity of reading; drifting apart from the natural space, the rising circular movement leads to the world of books, and, last but not least, the reading space arranged on different floors in a comfortable and homelike way externalises the process of deepening and comprehensive reading. The way passing through reading spaces leads us into nature, the construction built with the purpose of reading all the books piled up is absorbed by nature as a transitory passage, and thus it allows the peculiar comprehension of the conception of library through organic traditions.

In the inner space of the building, the great majority of materials is overshadowed; instead of them the decorative surface of colours is put into perspective. However, glass is emphasised, even though the environment becomes visible on its transparent surface and light is filtered through it, thus it never reflect itself, but always shifts something else in the centre of attention. Considering the harmonic division of material elements and glass surfaces, one can perceive the

dual game of concealing and revealing, just like in the case of using brick, as external material. White is the reigning colour in the building, there is a fine deconstructive aspect in the minimalist use of colours in Kaisa. The colour occurs as a medium bearing a certain message instead of transmitting its concrete meaning, thus deconstructing whole series of schematic associations linked to colours.

The visual element of the centre of the inner space, mentioned as one of the peculiarities of the building, is the ellipse, which has occurred in different references in the process of experiencing the building. As a visual element, it arranges the space in such a way that it harmoniously combines central and longitudinal map edit, thus creating a balanced transition between the approach with perspective and the dynamic one. It can be identified in the other floor plans as well, and it eliminates the breach that belongs to the original structure of the building. The double centre of the ellipse reveals the dualities identified in certain parts of the building: wall-window, brick-glass, regular-irregular, outer-inner, transmitter-messenger, contemplated space-experiential space, linear-circular, unfamiliar-homelike, white-colourful, geometric-organic, objective-subjective, etc. Similarly to light, the elliptic correlations pervade the aspects of the experience of building, allowing the speculative game of interpretation in all details. Thus, in the case of the Kaisa library, the mathematical aspects of the ellipse make clear the interoperability understood in a hermeneutical way. The elliptic correlation has been discovered as the outlining of a hermeneutical relationship.

The concept of service of the Kaisa library has been worked out according to the conception of *service design*. Based on the principle of participation and on designing the readers' profiles, the library services were collected and displayed on the internet website of the library, thus the transparency of the differentiated and diversified function is ensured by the digital surface. The library function conceived on the grounds of service design is outlined as an elliptic unit within the duality of anthropocentrism and mechanical quality. However, it is important to mention that conceiving the function of the Kaisa library on the basis of participation is carried out within a dialogue, and it leads to such an open structure that allows a continuous correction and adaptation on the basis of later feed-back.

During our experience of building we have come to another conclusion, namely that the building was designed as a medium with library function, integrating concrete functional alternatives, which can be traced back to various interpretations. There is a coreferential

correlation between the virtually structured function of the building and the building itself; in other words, both media have their own way of reflection.

Conclusions

As a result of my interpretative inquiry, I have concluded that the verbal displays of the building as well as those presented in other media, have led to such reflections, which can be viewed as autonomous alternatives of the building itself. The real building is not a self-reliant construction, which represents originality as opposed to all reproductive experiments, but such an artwork, viewed in an ontological approach, whose hermeneutical experience allows building reading as our self-recognition.

Text reading based on the model of loud reading, involving the entire body, can be applied to understanding architectural work. Gadamer recognised the function that hearing has in the process of reading, but he confined interpretation to a single medium of perception. With all this, I strongly believe that the medium of cognitive movement has to be expanded towards somatic dimension.

I interpret some perceptive processes in the context of the entire body; therefore, cognitive movement is arranged in the correlation of different perceptive processes, which belong to body unity. Therefore, I wish to replace the concept of loud reading with that of *organic reading*, within which reading can be conceived in the organic unity of inner cognitive processes and corporeality. Thus, the statement which refers to the fact that architectural works are created and built-up in the *transforming experience of reading*, is given full support.

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